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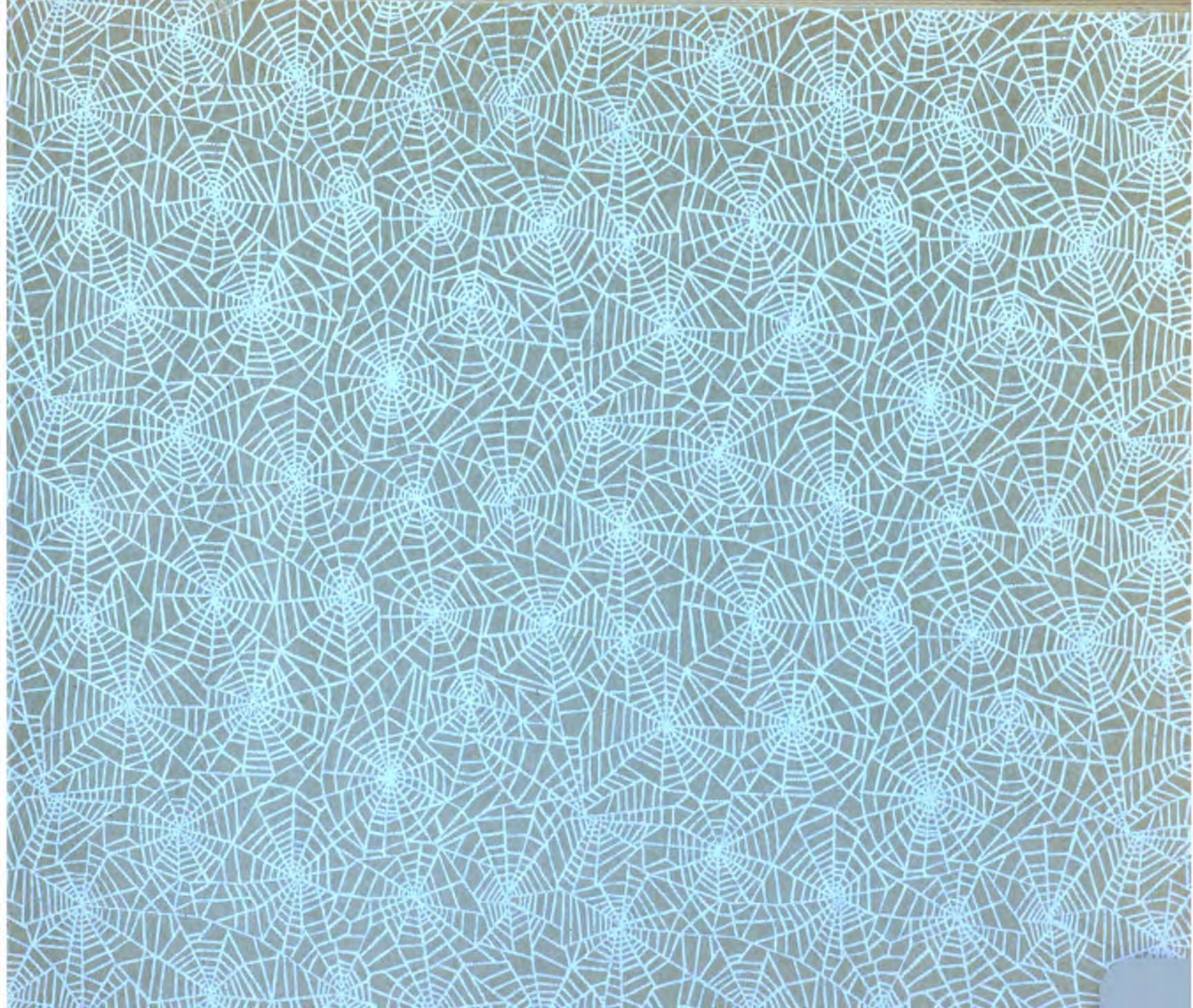
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# The Totems of Alaska

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JUNEAU, ALASKA

11 F 382.1 641  
Alaska  
S. H. Beck, 1961.

## I N T R O D U C T O R Y.

THE illustrations contained in this book convey a good idea of the various forms of Alaskan totems as well as a portrayal of the handicraft of the Haidas of extreme Southeastern Alaska and the Tlingits, their northern neighbors, among whom the practice of erecting totems has been prevalent.

It is impossible in a brief treatise to give an accurate interpretation of the crude heraldry of a primitive people without making a study of individual totems. An analysis of each illustration will serve to enlighten the reader as to the general significance of totem blazonry as expressed in the carvings and other designs of the Haidas and Tlingits.

Whatever suggestion of idolatry the uncouth and barbarous appearance of the totems may convey to the casual observer, it is certain that such a practice was not thought of by the Haidas. The innate recognition of supernatural power, which is common to all savage people, was not centered in one divine being. These children of nature developed a veneration for birds and animals to which they ascribed human intelligence. The transmigratory idea finds a place in the vague traditions of a spiritual power for good or for evil which changed the forms of men to birds or to animals and vice versa. A crude ideality led to the association of each family with some form of animal life, the recording of which resulted in the rude carvings called totem poles. As nearly as can be determined, the original purpose in erecting totems before the houses was to distinguish each group of families having the same crest. Take, for example, the carving in the foreground of the Howkan village illustration, which represents an eagle. This would be found all sufficient to indicate the house of the eagle clan and would be the home of all those having the eagle as the crest or emblem of their totemic system, whether visitors from other tribes or permanent dwellers.



TOTEMS AT HOWKAN VILLAGE.

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## THE HAIDAS.

THE principal villages of the Haidas are those of Cape Fox and Tongass on the mainland, Kassan and Klinquan on Prince of Wales Island and Howkan on Long Island, all of which had, until recent years, numerous totems in great variety of design.

Intermarriage was common between the Haidas and the Tlingits, and the same general system prevailed which prevented the marriage of near relatives. Throughout Southeastern Alaska, all families having the same emblem are deemed to be of blood relation. Should a Tlingit of the Raven family visit the Haidas in search of a wife, he would not be permitted to wed one of the Raven family of these people. Assuming that he should marry one of the Wolf clan, the children of the union would adopt the crest of the mother and, when away from home, would seek shelter in the house of Wolf totem, if their wanderings took them to the villages of other tribes.

The present houses are nearly all of modern type, many sizes smaller than the massive structures of former years, when they were built of heavy timbers hewn out of giant forest trees. Each house gave shelter to numerous families of the same totem and they were necessarily of ample proportions.

**G**RAVE totems are as a rule erected to the memory of some individual of high rank and represents the emblem of his clan. Many of these totems have receptacles in which, after cremation, the ashes of the dead are deposited, but the practice of late years has been to provide burial places for the dead at some distance from the villages.

What is commonly called the "Whale" totem is seen in the illustration of grave totems and will also be noticed in many other places. All such figures are distinctive in the exaggerated size of the dorsal fin and display of formidable teeth, intended as the symbol of power. The portrayal is of a Leviathan, suggestive of the whale, but investigation proves it to be meant for the orca or grampus, the most powerful and ferocious of all cetaceans. This monster of the deep finds an important place in the totem designs of the Haidas and Tlingits and is the emblem of many high-class families of both tribes.

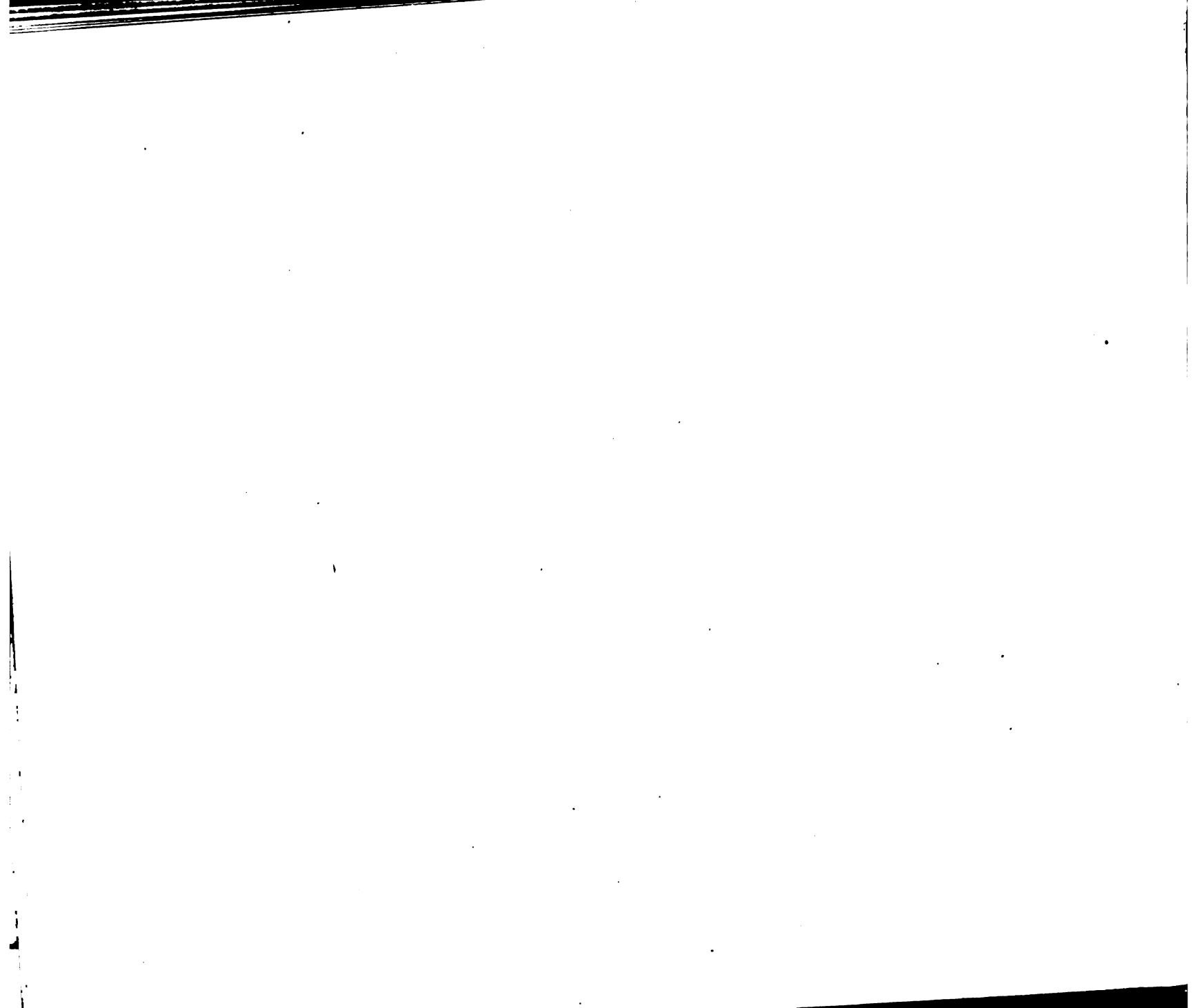
THE Tlingits of Alaska are few in number. Their homes are widely scattered, principally among the islands of Southeastern Alaska, though many have settled on the mainland as far north as Yakutat. While not a united people, their intertribal relations are well established and the boundaries of the hunting grounds of each division tacitly understood. Reference is made to the various branches or tribal unions according to the locality of their settlements. The Stickine, Taku, Chilkoot, Chilkat and Yakutat tribes live on the mainland and until recent years controlled the fur trade with the interior natives. The Sitka, Kake, Auk and Hoonah tribes have their homes and hunting grounds among the islands scattered along the coast.

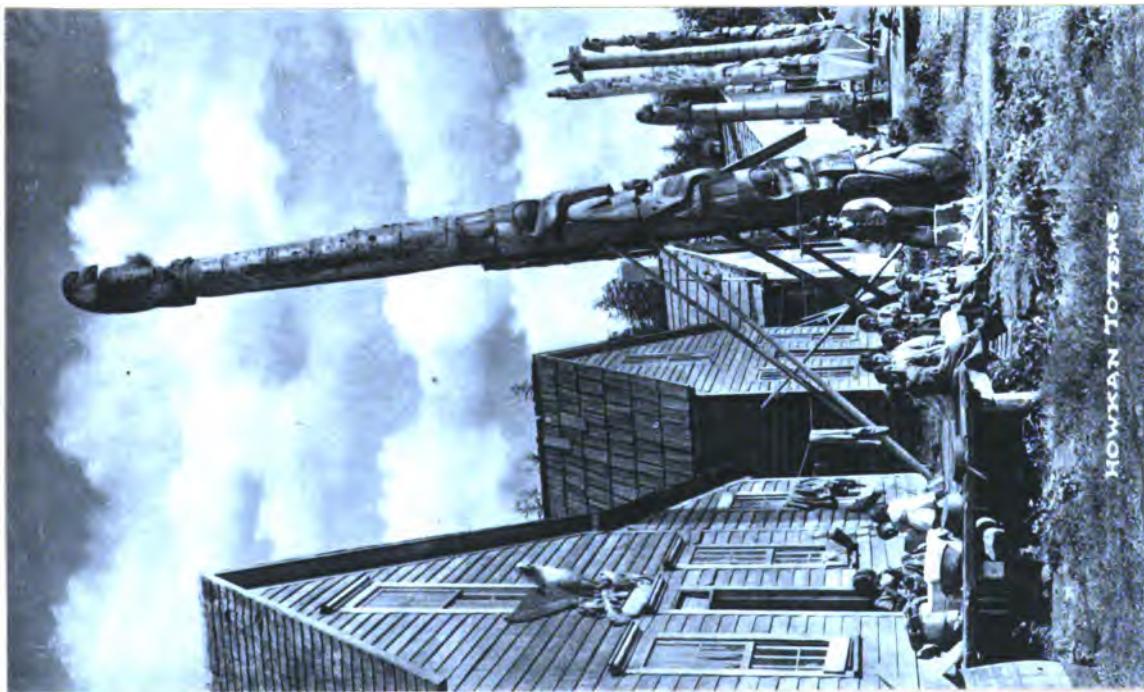
Although not the originators of totem carvings, the Tlingits have shown an aptitude equal to the Haidas both in execution and interpretation of what might be termed the hieroglyphics of the North. The erection of massive totem poles did not seem to appeal to the Tlingits as strongly as the totem designs which are so much in evidence among them. Emblazoned on treasure chests, wrought in articles of every day use, painted on the exteriors and interiors of houses, woven into basketry and the famous Chilkat blanket are designs showing a high order of artistic conception and execution.

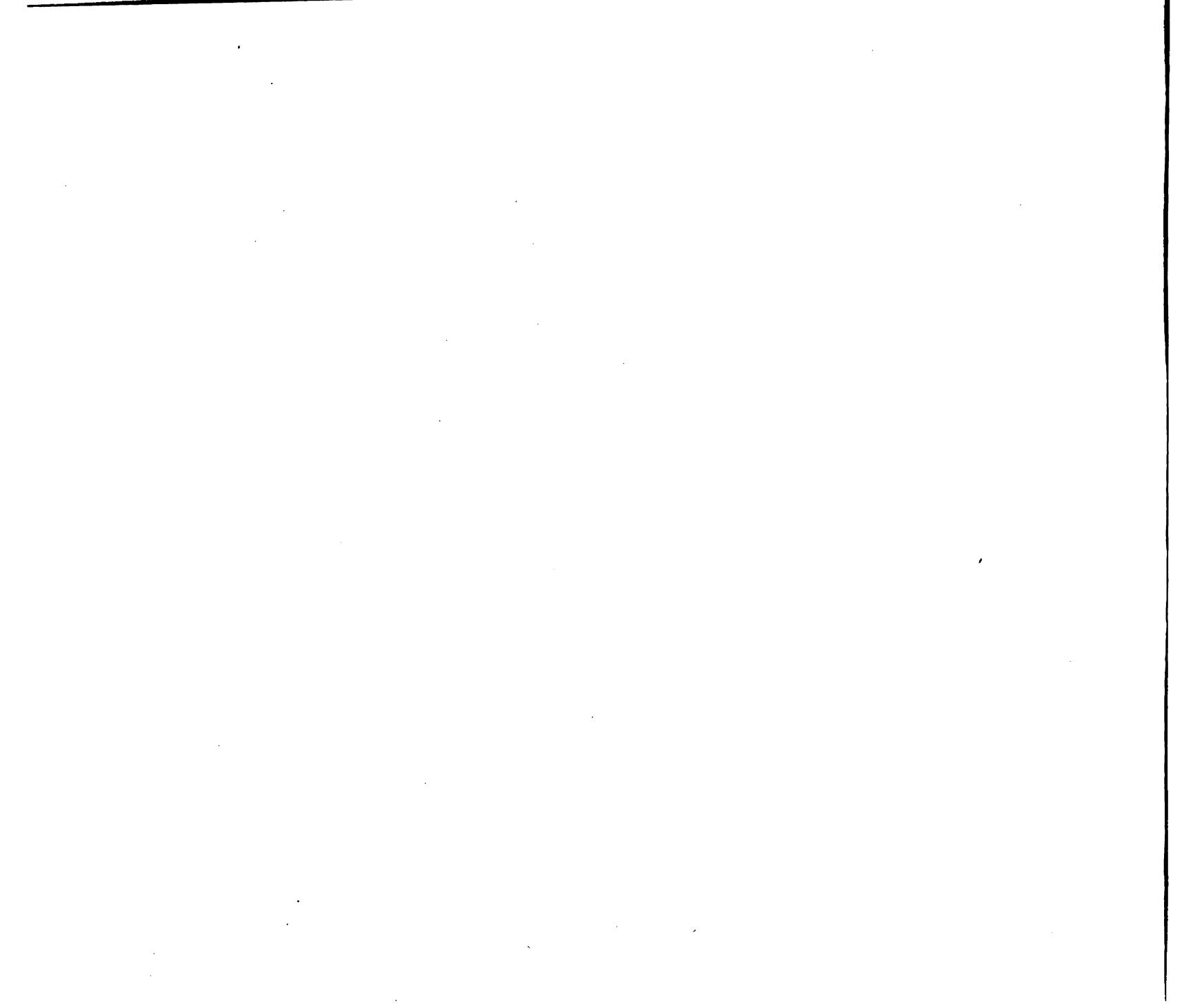
Excellent carvings in wood, stone, metal, bone and horn can be purchased from the Tlingits. These are not made with any idea of utility, and their cost is very low in comparison with the skill of the carver and the time given to the work.

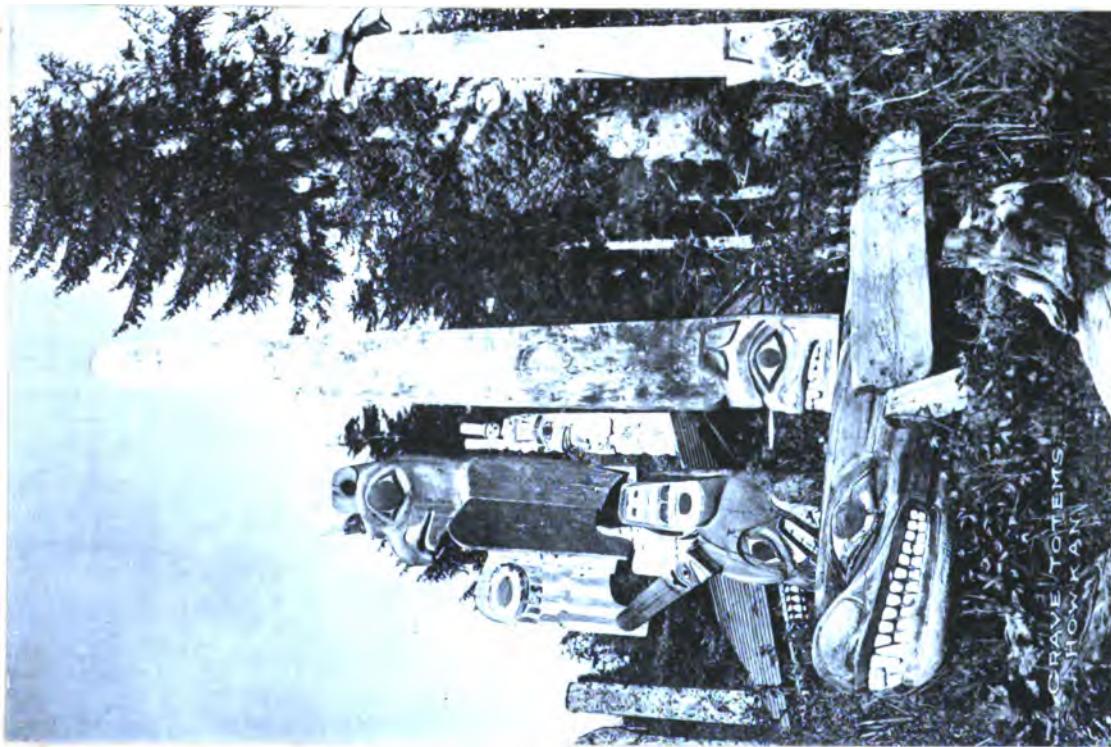


KLIN-QUAN - INDIAN VILLAGE, ALASKA.

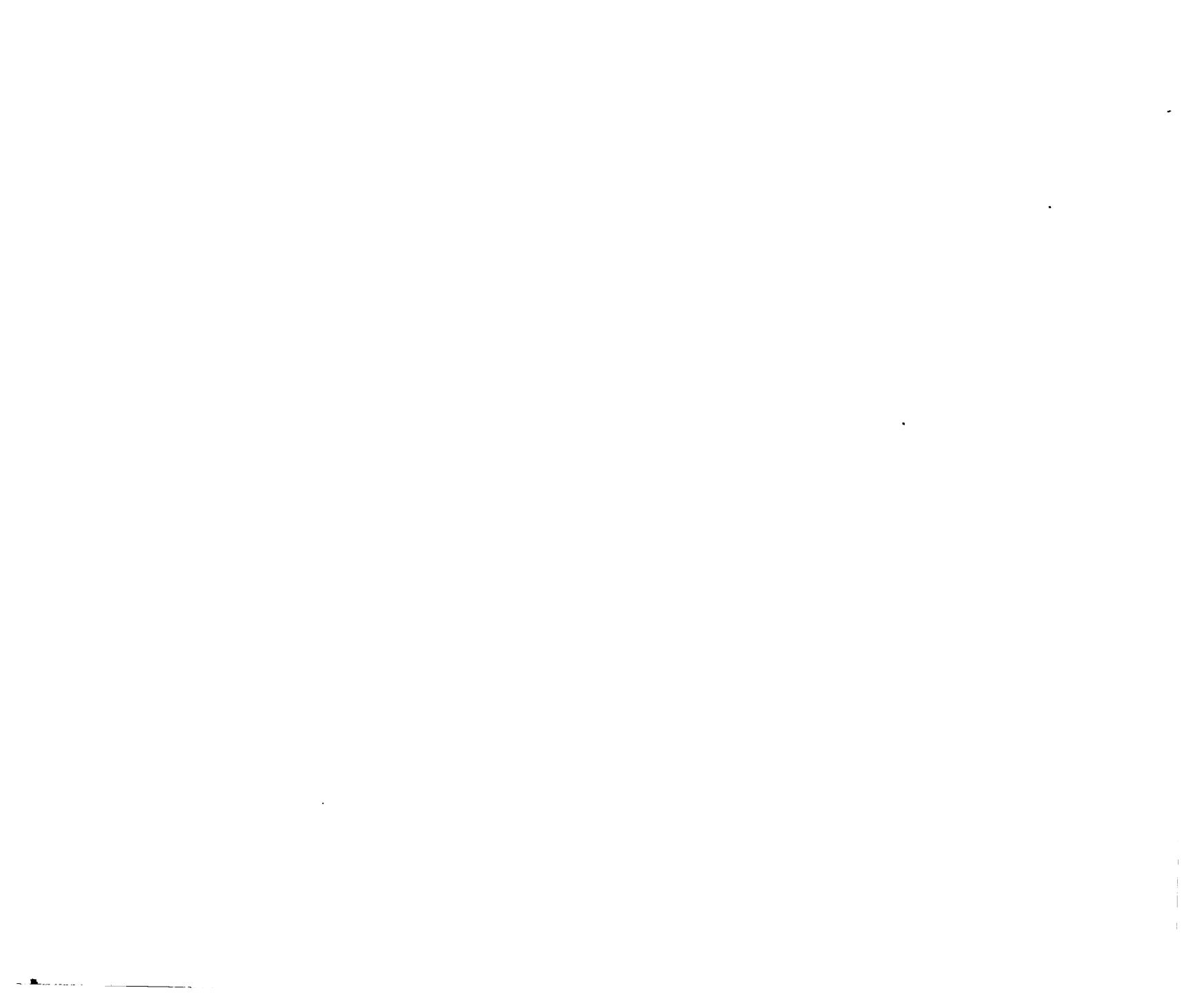












## THE SHAKES TOTEMS.

THE family holding highest rank among the southern tribes of the Tlingits is that of Chief Shakes of the Stickines. Their totems at Wrangell have for years been the center of interest to tourists.

The bear, called "Hootz" in the Tlingit language, is the most powerful animal known to these people. In the adoption of this animal as their totem, the family of *Shakes* symbolize courage, strength and bravery as the attributes of their ancestors. Invincible as the bear is in the animal kingdom, so should the people of the Shakes household be in their tribe.

The domination of the sea is also claimed as a prerogative by the Shakes family. Side by side with the bear totem is that of the grampus, known as "keet" in the native tongue. Although this voracious cetacean is of the whale kind, a distinction is made necessary as the traditions of the natives deal with the predatory nature of the grampus.

Many years ago there lived among the Tlingits a man of wealth and high rank, named Nah-tse-tla-neh. On one of his hunting expeditions in search of sea otter he was overtaken by a sudden storm when far out upon the ocean. As the blackness of night settled over the seas and all hope of reaching a haven of safety was lost, despair was suddenly turned to exultation. Out of the phosphorescent waves a huge figure shaped like a man, slowly arose, poised for a moment and then disappeared. Nah-tse-tla-neh had been taught that he who gazed upon Gunah-kah-daht in time of trouble should find relief. Faith in the legends of his forefathers instinctively taught him that safety and good fortune were before him.

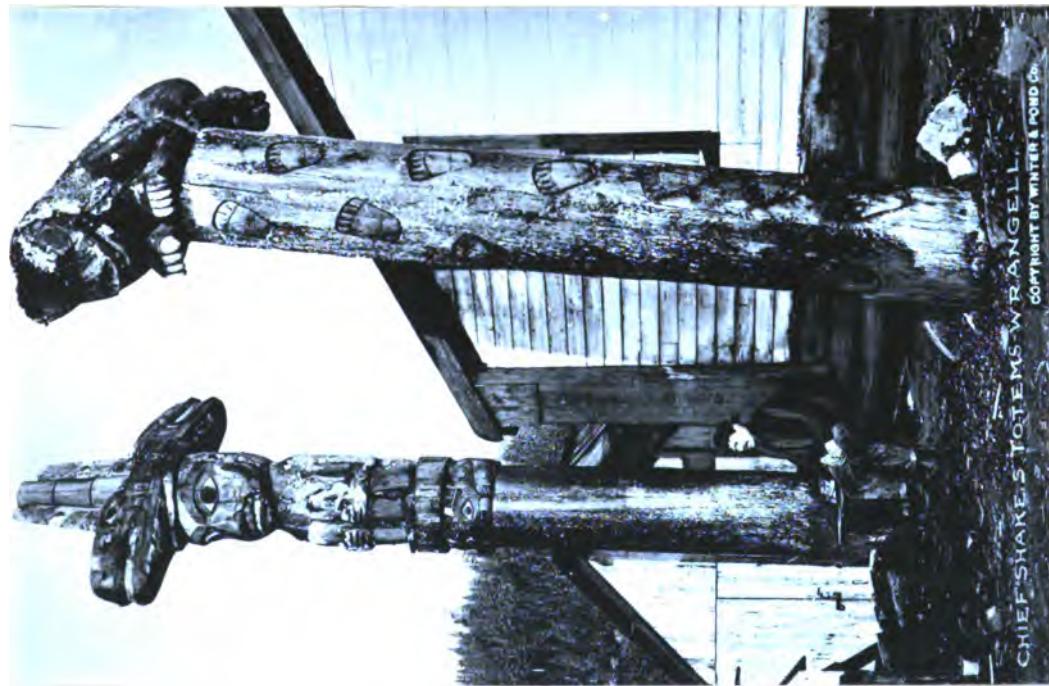
Buffeted for hours by the turbulent waters, the canoe was finally dashed high upon a rocky shore. At daybreak a scant supply of food and other equipment of the hunters was saved from the wreckage. Exploration proved that they had been cast upon a small densely wooded island and that starvation awaited them if relief did not come. Nah-tse-tla-neh dreamed each night that his salvation depended upon his ability to give shape to an unheard of creature, so fierce in appearance that when placed in the sea all living things would seek the shore to escape being preyed upon. Day and night he worked with his stone axe until he had fashioned eight images of the keet, which he had so vividly seen in his dreams. The pangs of hunger were felt for many days, but faith in Gunah-kah-daht gave him strength to continue his labors. Each day the seals sported in the waters, always near shore, but at a safe distance from the spears of the starving hunters.

At last the images were completed and, being launched into the sea, disappeared from sight. Anxiously the little group gazed out upon the water but their eyes were cast in the wrong direction. Signs of life appeared along the shore and to their amazement the seals were seen clambering over the rocks, taking no heed of the presence of human beings in their efforts to escape the fierce attack of a new enemy from the ocean depths.

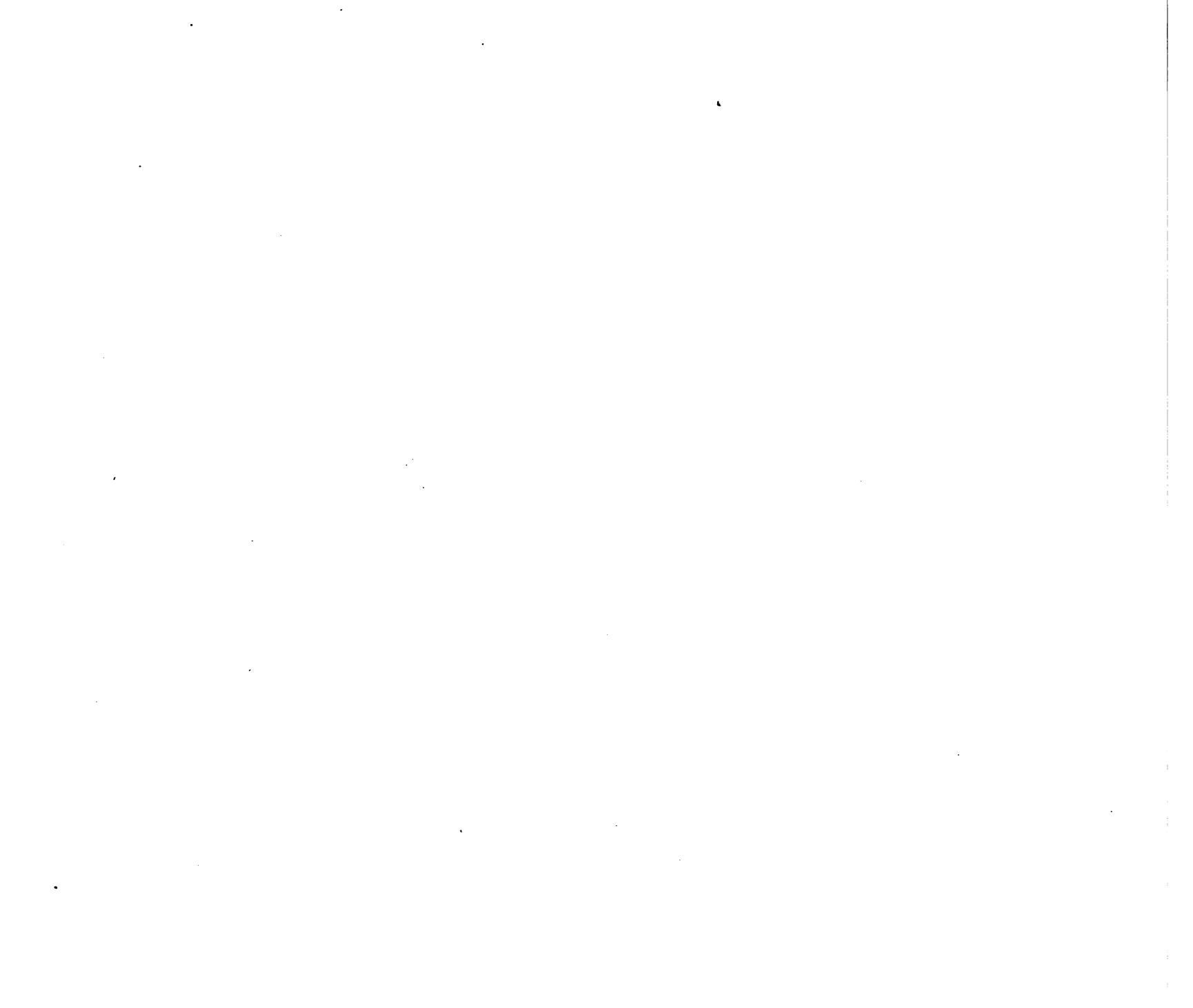
The shore was lined with fish as the tide receded. These were dried in the sun and served as food for the castaways. After many weeks of patient labor a canoe was hewn out of a giant cedar log and Nah-tse-tla-neh was enabled to return to his home and friends. To this day when the huge dorsal fin of the ferocious keet is seen cleaving the waters, the natives look towards the shore, for the seals will seek shelter among the rocks, where they are easily dispatched by the hunters.

Toh-yot, the last of the totem carvers, recorded the union of Kad-a-shan and Shakes families in one of the best pieces of totem picture to be found in Wrangell. A study of the totems of these two families is all that is required to gain a knowledge of the meaning and purpose of totem poles.

This totem was erected by one of the Shakes chiefs in honor of his wife, a daughter of Kad-a-shan. The principal figures are those of the chief, which Toh-yot represents with a raven's head, the sun-box and the raven and child, making a very elaborate representation of the story of Nass-shikke-yahl. At the base of the totem is Gunah-kah-daht, who smiles with favor on the Shakes family. Above this figure is the seagull, the recorder of tribal history, who tells of the wonderful things accomplished by the families of Kad-a-shan and Shakes.



CHIEF SHAKES' TOTEM AT ANGELL'S  
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## THE KAD-A-SHAN TOTEMS.

THE ancestors of *Chief Kad-a-shan* were Haida people of high degree. Through intermarriage with the Tlingits their home was established in the village of the Stickines. The legendary lore of the Haidas and Tlingits is replete with the miracles performed by birds and animals having human intellect as well as the power of assuming human shape.

The first people of the earth lived in semi-darkness. Phosphorescent light from the waters and artificial light from fires was the extent of Nature's favor. Many years after the creation of man, the head chief of the Haidas had a dream in which he saw the coming of light into the world. When the great white bird Yahl\* brought from the skies the sun-box which contained the sun, the moon and countless stars, the land would be ablaze with light, for the chief was to place on the highest mountains the sun and moon and distribute among his people the brilliant stars, each of which was the size of a tiny pebble.

The chief kept secret his dream and resolved that should it be realized he would keep the sun-box and thus add to his wealth and power. In course of time, Yahl came from the skies and the sun-box was placed in the house of the great chief. So carefully was it guarded that the contents were unknown to any but those who dwelt with him. Yahl hovered over the house of the covetous chief, for the sun-box must be recovered and light given to the world. The people wondered whether the presence of the great white bird presaged good or evil.

The chief had but one child, a young maiden. When she went from home, Yahl was sure to be near her, seeking her favor so that he might gain entrance to the house. Failing in this he watched for the maiden to go to the spring. As she quenched her thirst, Yahl changed his form to that of a tiny pebble and dropping into the wooden cup was swallowed as she drank.

Time passed. Humiliation and sorrow hung over the home of the great chief for a child had been born to his daughter without a father to give it welcome. The disappearance of Yahl caused the people to think that the bird had brought distress to the house of their chief. Shame gave way under the gentle influence of sympathy and love. The infant developed into a bright sturdy boy whose happy nature brought joy into the household. To please the little one the lid of the treasure box was often raised and the rays of light which came forth caused peals of laughter which sounded like the songs of forest birds.

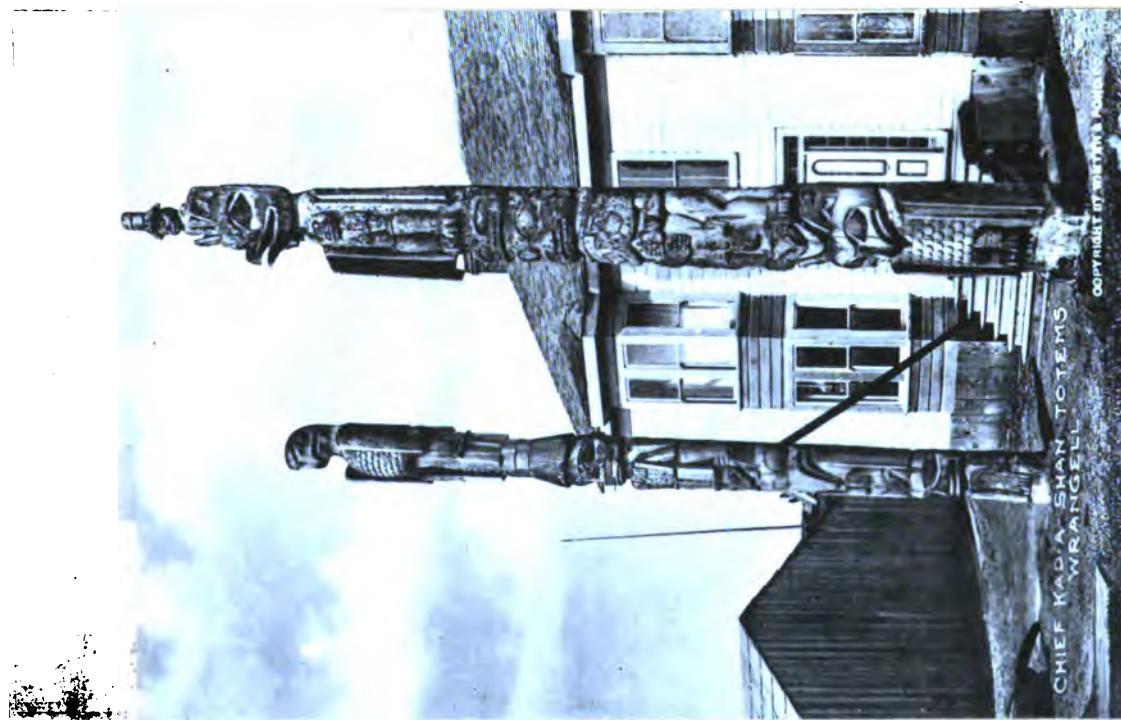
As the boy grew older and strong enough to raise the lid, he took from the box the tiny brilliants and as he played with them the house rang with the sound of his merriment. When he was not watched, the boy would toss the shining gems through the smoke hole in the center of the house, and they would rise up into the sky. So artful was he that the loss was not noticed by the chief, but the people marvelled at the appearance of the bright stars in the heavens.

Time went swiftly, and the chief watched with pride the growth and wonderful strength developed by his ward. The boy could carry the box on his shoulders, or toss it almost to the roof. The chief taught him that he was to be the guardian of the priceless treasure and rested secure in the thought that it was well protected.

A storm swept the land and threatened destruction to the house of the great chief. The family gathered around the fire in fear and trembling. Suddenly the fierce wind tore a hole in the roof and in dumb amazement the people of the house saw the boy seize the sun-box and, with a loud cry such as only Yahl could make, rise through the opening, at the same time taking the form of a great white bird. So Yahl recovered the box, and the sun, the moon and countless stars were placed in the heavens, far from the reach of human selfishness.

At the base of the totem which tells the story of the raven is the figure of an eagle. The smaller of the two Kad-a-shan totems might be called a continuation of the family history, which the totem represents. Between the raven and the eagle a story is recorded. The escutcheons below the eagle indicate wealth. The next figure is that of a chief, which is always indicated by the characteristic hat. The chief holds a shield on which is emblazoned the sign of wealth. Below this is the head of a wolf, a smaller branch of the family. Next the figures of a sea-gull and frog combine to make a story. The last figure is that of Gunah-kah-daht, connecting the family of Kad-a-shan with that of Shakes.

\*The raven was once white according to tradition.



CHIEF KADA'S SHAN WRANGEL TOTEMS

OPPOSITE PAGE





## BURIAL PLACES.

UNTIL recent years, cremation of the dead, especially those of the higher classes, was practiced by the Tlingits. When the funeral pyre was reduced, the ashes were gathered, and together with the personal effects of the deceased, placed in small houses built for that purpose. The advance of civilization has caused the abandonment of former customs which have almost entirely given way to Christian burial. It is not uncommon to see marble monuments erected over the graves of the Tlingit dead. An occasional combination of modern and primitive ideas will be found, of which the accompanying illustrations, 7 and 10, are fair examples.

The grave of the Tlingit iktuh, or medicine man, is isolated from that of his tribesmen. On a high bluff or point of land overlooking the water, a boxlike structure of logs or lumber is built, being elevated a few feet from the ground. In this the body is interred with the scant attire, images and other ceremonial effects peculiar to his craft. The canoe of the deceased is placed at the base of the rough sepulcher. On the front of this structure is carved or more frequently painted the totem of his clan. There is no combination of figures as the pride of the Tlingit iktuh centers in his individuality rather than in family ties.



GRAVE HOUSES NEAR KETCHIKAN



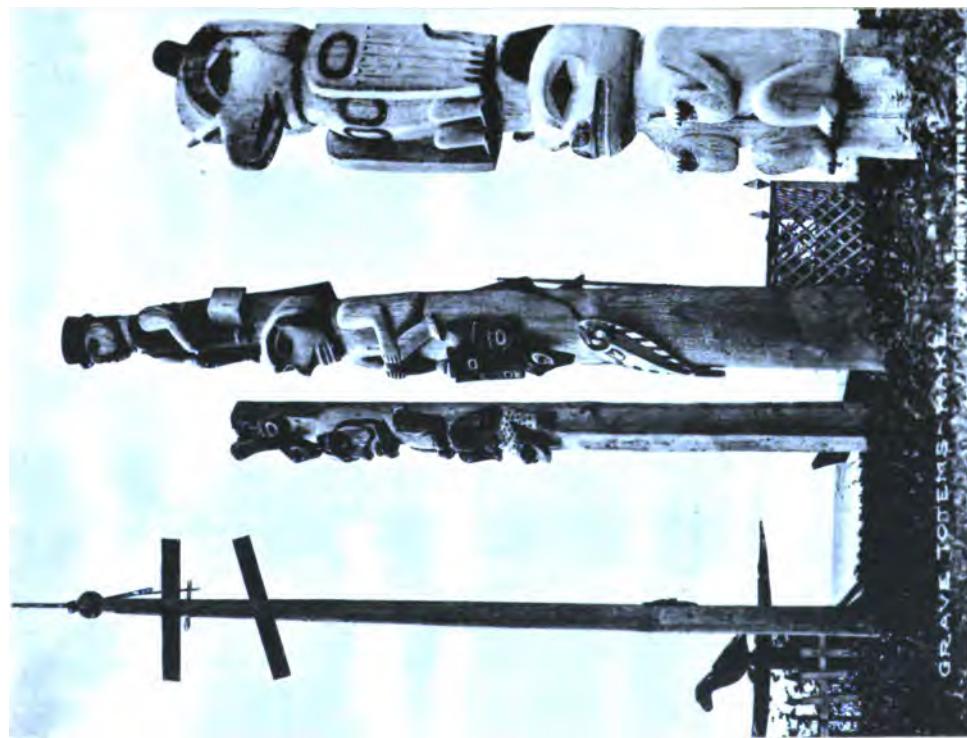


## THE KAKE TOTEMS

THE Kake branch of the Tlingits have a very unsavory reputation among the people of Alaska. It is thought that many prospectors and hunters have met with foul play at the hands of the Kake tribe. The Tlingit custom throughout Alaska has been to take the life of one or two white men to even the score when a native is killed. As several as the Kake people have met such a fate during the past twenty years, it is reasonable to suppose that the old custom will not be slighted.

The white man is readily recognized in the topmost figure of a large totem erected over the grave of his Kake victim. The totem reminds the members of the Raven clan that the life of a white man must be forfeited. The avenger is likened to a Raven, and the halibut, its prey, typifies the white man.

The same idea is suggested by the totem at the left of the large one, in which the aggressive spirit of the Raven towards the white enemy finds expression.







## THE KAH L-TEEN TOTEM.

THE totem erected to the memory of Chief Kahl-teen is the most recent of the Wrangell totems. The workmanship is of a higher order than that of the older carvings, which is probably due to the fact that modern tools were used in the execution of the work. The use of paint artistically applied adds to the attractive appearance of the totem.

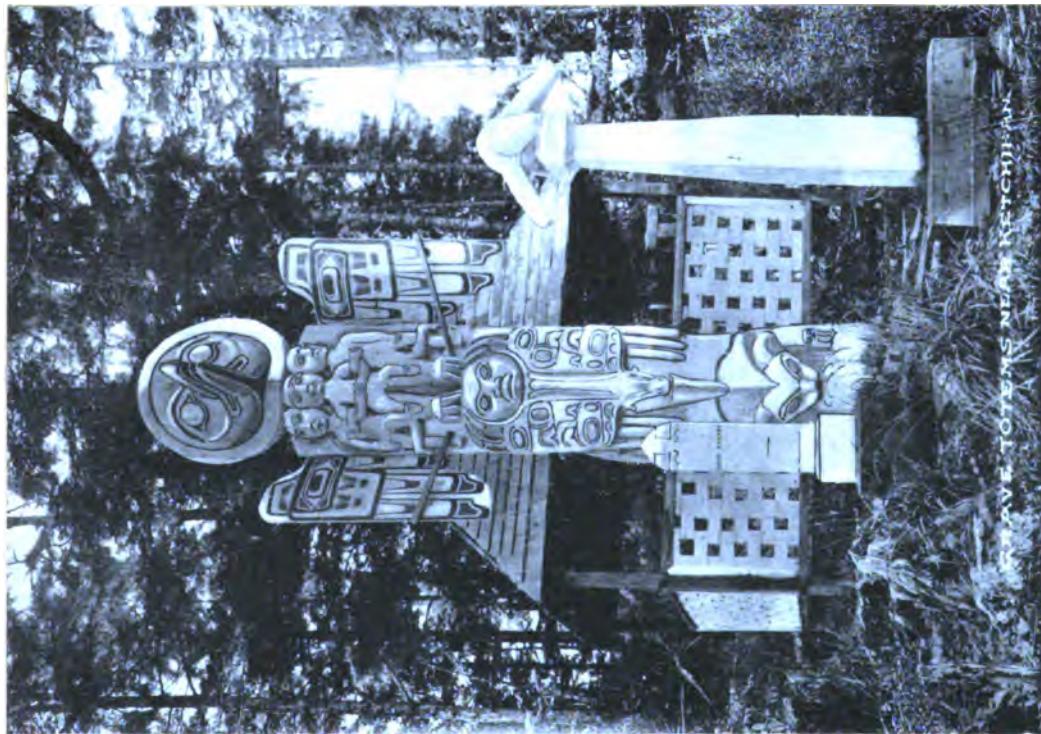
The two figures called Klone represent a rock in the Stickine river canyon at the head of navigation. This is the limit of the territory belonging to the division of the frog clan of which Kahl-teen was a member. Below the frog is a figure of Yahl, the raven, telling the story of Nass-shikke-yahl to the younger generations. On the base of the totem is the beaver, a symbol of thrift and energy, from which the frog family developed the strength which placed them in the foremost ranks of their people.



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## I M A G E S.

**A** distinct type of carvings found among the Tlingits are those of the iktuh, or medicine-man, perhaps better known by the Russian name of shaman, meaning a wizard or conjuror. The power of these sorcerers among their people was even greater than that of the chiefs.

Superstition and ignorance yielded readily to the machinations of the crafty iktuh so that he was enabled to exact tribute from those accused of causing sickness by means of witchcraft.

Sickness was supposed to be due to the influence of evil spirits and it rested with the iktuh to cope with them. Loud incantations, mysterious mutterings and frequent consultations with hideous images at the couch of the sick person were the methods employed to rid the body of its malady.

The people of Kluk-wan look with superstitious awe in the direction of the burial place of the iktuh Shah when his name is mentioned. In a cotton-wood grove overlooking the Chilkat river, below the village, is the grave of the most renowned of all iktuhs. Knee deep in the forest leaves stands Gow-gē-a-deh (the man with the drum) with arm outstretched. The image, called the servant of Shah, once held an immense drum, which was beaten continuously during the ceremonies attending the healing of the sick. The upright image standing on the frog symbolizes the good influence of the frog family, of which Shah was a member. The spirit of evil is represented by a distorted human shape in which all the ills of mankind are embodied. With the aid of the good spirits and the practice of his magic, the iktuh is supposed to transfer the ailment of the sick person to the image of the demoniac and thus to effect a cure.







## G O O - T E E K H L .

**I**N the house of the frog clan at Kluk-wan, a village on the Chilkat river, are two very old and well preserved images known to the natives as Goo-teekhl and Gootz-hun. On either side of the doorway, in the center end of the structure, is the family totem. Carved in bold relief out of immense slabs of wood are the frog figures, flanked by the images, which for many generations have been reverenced by the frog family.

Traditions tell of a giant cannibal called Goo-teekhl, whose ravages had for years been the terror of the Chilkat people. Of such gigantic proportions was he that arrows and spears were of no protection against his onslaughts. The frequency of his visits threatened to exterminate the Chilkats unless some means were devised by which he could be put to death. Through the ingenuity of the frog family a pitfall was arranged into which he was lured. The warriors were in readiness to take advantage of the fallen giant and he was quickly enveloped in an immense net made of animal sinews. In his frantic efforts to free himself, the monster became so entangled in the meshes that he was rendered powerless. Brush and dry wood were heaped high upon the prostrate body and ignited. For days fuel was added to the flames until not a vestige of Goo-teekhl remained. The wind scattered ashes from the pyre far and wide over the country. Each tiny particle soon developed life in the form of a mosquito. The blood-thirsty tendency of this voracious insect is attributed to the fact that life was not extinct when the giant cannibal was burned. While the fire destroyed the human shape of Goo-teekhl, life was disseminated in the ashes and was the cause of bringing mosquitos into existence. The thirst for blood was thus transmitted to the mosquito and the spirit of Goo-teekhl being freed from evil influence of such nature found embodiment in the image so carefully guarded by the frog family.

Fortune smiles on those who dream of Goo-teekhl, therefore favor is sought by the people of the clan who dwell within the house, by providing daily food for the image. Fish oil is poured upon the lips and flows over the body. While not adding to the appearance of the figure, it has had the effect of preserving the wood. Perhaps some day the people of the frog clan may be induced to part with Goo-teekhl in the interests of ethnology.

The totem at the left of the illustration is a splendid exemplification of the story of Goo-teekhl. To those familiar with the tradition, interpretation will not seem difficult. The frogs in the arms of the cannibal and the mosquito attacking the frog are represented in this carving.



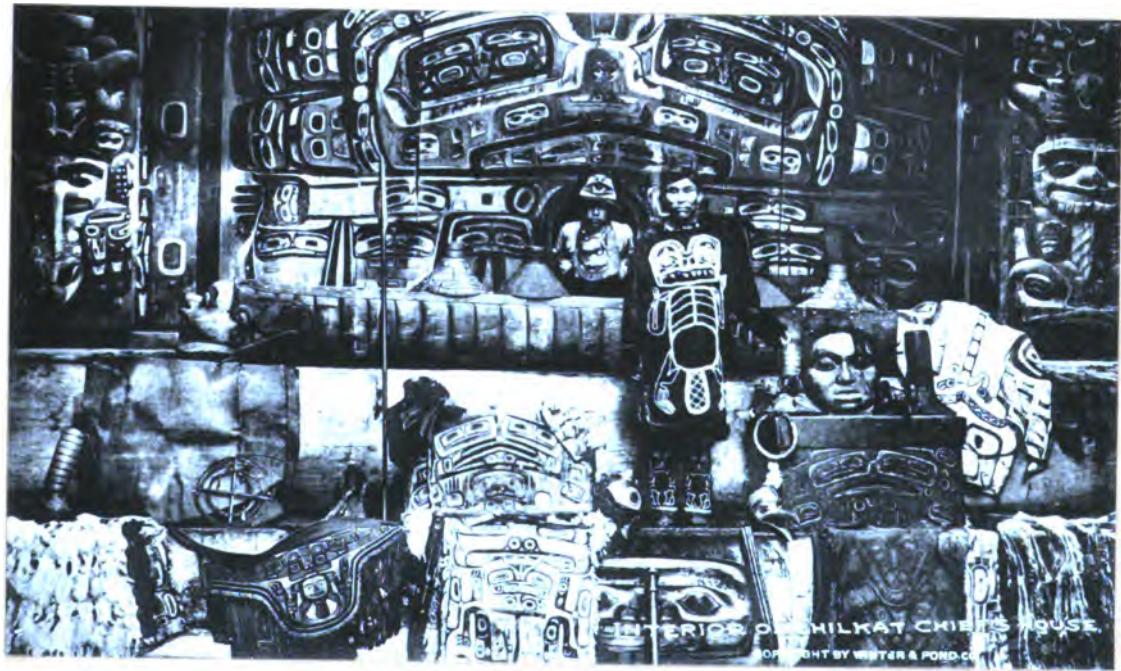
GOOTEMHL AND  
GOOTZ HONK  
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## T H E C H I L K A T S.

THE warlike spirit of the Chilkats caused them to encroach upon the rights of other Tlingit tribes. Tribute was paid to the marauders as a guarantee of peace. They were wont to extend their depredations as far as the land of the Haidas, gathering on their raids valuable trophies. On one occasion they swooped down upon the house of a Haida chief while a feast was in progress. Among the prizes taken at that time was a leathern apron (seen in illustration 3) worn by the chief as an emblem of his rank. The design of the trophy appealed strongly to the fancy of the Chilkat people. As the women of the tribe sought to reproduce it, they developed a proficiency in the art of weaving which led to the production of the now famous Chilkat blanket. In the house of the chief the carvers made an immense pattern from which various combinations of totem designs were selected by the weavers who assembled there. The chief held aloof from the members of his household but day and night watched the progress of the work from his apartment behind the totems.







## THE CHILKAT BLANKET.

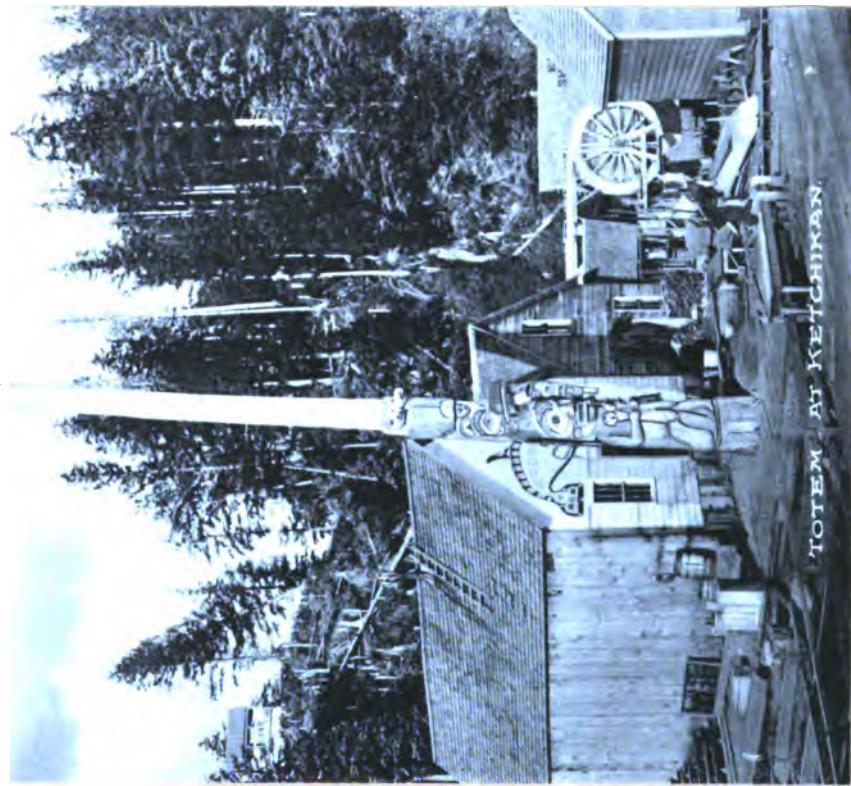
**A**S the fame of the Chilkat blanket spread among the natives of Southeastern Alaska, traders from the various tribes flocked to the land of the Chilkats to offer valuable furs in exchange for the products of the weaver. An industry was developed that brought wealth and prosperity to the people of this region. The hunters of the tribe were diligent in the pursuit of the mountain goat to procure the necessary wool for the manufacture of the blankets. Friendly relations were restored with other tribes and the Chilkats and Haidas met again under peaceful auspices. To-day the Chilkat blanket is more frequently seen among the Haidas than among any of the Tlingit tribes.

The art of the weaver was not confined to the weaving of blankets alone, as many ceremonial robes are treasured by the natives, each distinctive in the character of its totemic design.



THE CHILKAT BLANKET











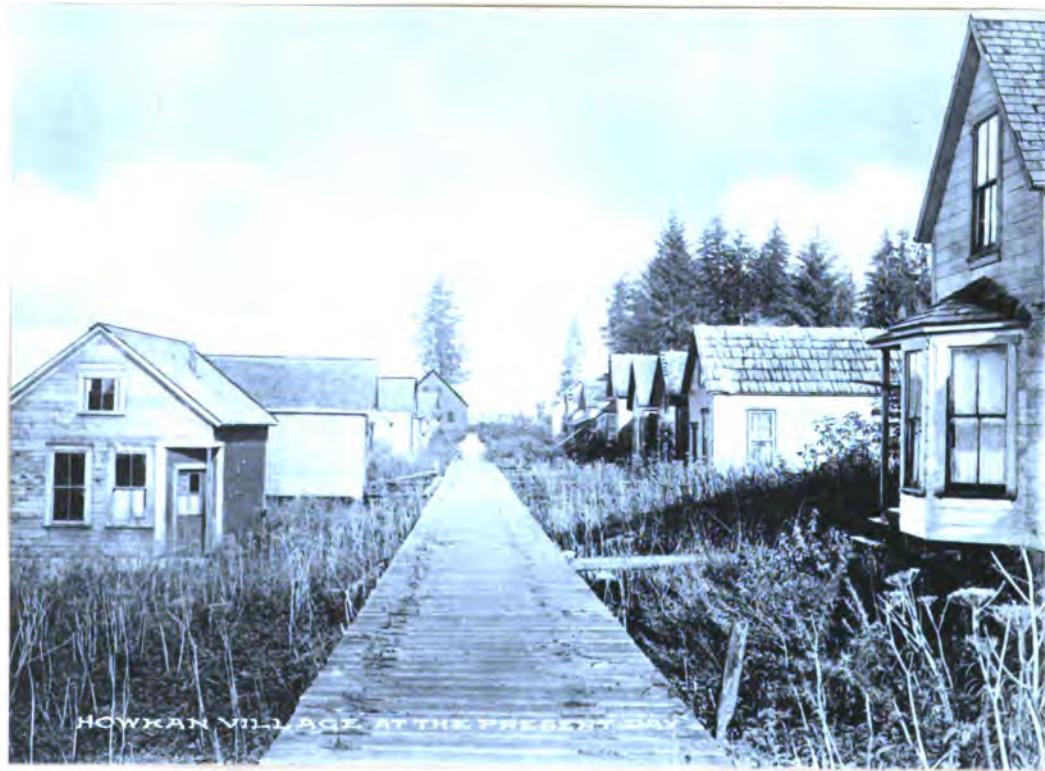


## CONCLUSION.

THE twentieth century native of Southeastern Alaska is totally indifferent to the traditions of his fathers. The village totems crumble and fall, and to him have no greater value than to provide kindling for his fire. Those of his white brethren who wander from the centers of civilization to gaze on his once picturesque abode, find it shorn of the rude symbols of his ancestors. On entering Howkan village we see on every side evidences of the white man's influence. The broad sidewalk, flanked on either side with unpretentious cottages, the government school house, from which comes forth strains of our national airs, blending with the music of the phonograph which more than a few homes possess. And the people—well dressed, intelligent, industrious. Such is Howkan of the present day, the one time typical village of the Haidas.

While there are many villages scattered through Southeastern Alaska that will for years be of interest to those who may be privileged to visit them, the great majority of sight seers will have to content themselves with glimpses of totems, seen at various points on the steamship routes.

The Wrangell and other totems described herein may be of greater interest at the present time, but the splendid specimens of the totem carvers' art standing in the national Indian River reservation at Sitka, will perhaps be the last evidence of the aboriginal method of recording history, and will long prove an attraction to students of ethnology, despite the fact that they are far removed from the land of the Haidas, where they were originally erected.



HOWKAN VILLAGE AT THE PRESENT DAY













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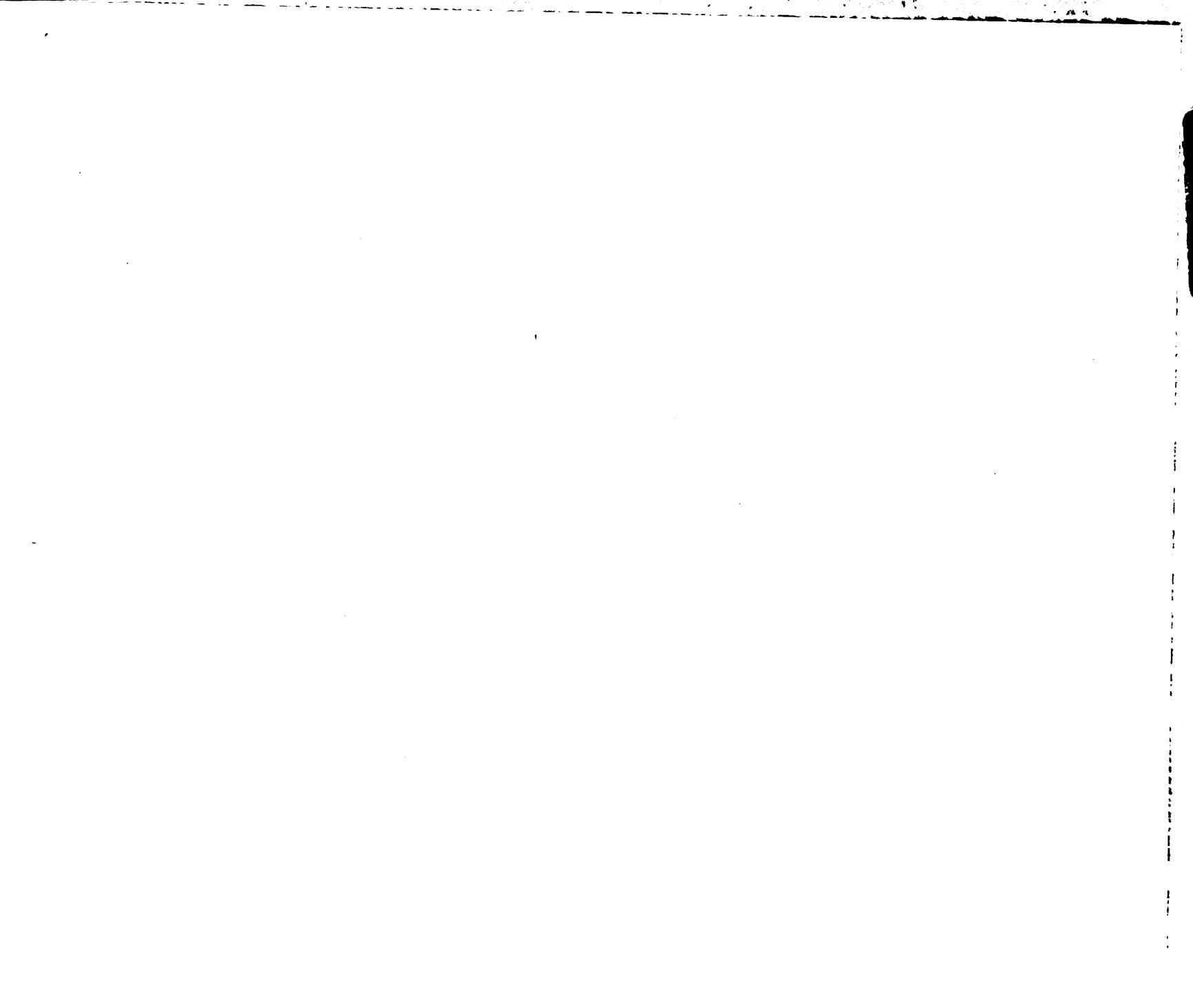
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